



Thursday, November 04, 1999

Eric Taylor,
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The intent of this letter is to express our concern regarding both the Prince William Sound and the Western Alaska Regional Transportation Plans as they relate the the Alaska Marine Highway System and in specific the ports of call and the home port of the M/V Tustemena. For more than 35 years, the M/V Tustemena has been a vital transportation and freight link to the eastern Kenai Peninsula, the railbelt, and the outlying remote communities along its route. The Seward Chamber of Commerce feels that to remove this service will further exacerbate certain economic hardships in the Eastern Kenai Peninsula and in remote regions as well as force the State of Alaska to further increase the general fund support of the service for the future.

A key reason given to divert the M/V Tustemena in the Western Alaska Transportation Plan is that under the new plan it will be possible to greatly increase the number of trips to Unalaska annually. However, as many who are familiar with this route will tell you, the journey from Kodiak to Unalaska is an extremely long and rough journey in the open ocean. The trip is necessarily expensive due to its length, which makes it more cost effective for almost all passengers to take a relatively short airline flight rather than utilize the Marine Highway System. Even with the increased level of service, it is doubtful that the expected increase in passenger numbers will materialize. While the car deck and freight loads of the Marine Highway may increase under the plan, it is highly unlikely that passenger counts will also increase. This is because of a cost savings to ship vehicles and containers through the Marine Highway when compared to standard barge service.

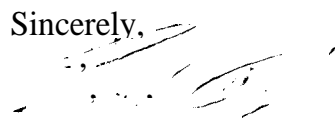
By removing Marine Highway Service from Seward, the State of Alaska would also be discontinuing the usage of the only true inter-modal port in the state. Seward has year-round rail, highway, ship, and boat access to the rest of the world, and sees considerable use as a direct result of our close proximity to Anchorage, an attribute that is found nowhere else on the Prince William Sound or the Western Alaska Marine Highways. Removing this service from Seward will cause overall Marine Highway System costs to increase as well as the cost of goods and freight in remote areas served by the system.

The Seward Port is also the site of future improvements that will directly benefit the Alaska Marine Highway System. Over the next several years, the Alaska Railroad has planned an ambitious capital improvement project which involves a complete renovation of their current facilities as well as the construction of a new dock which will include a preferred mooring location to be utilized by the Alaska Marine Highway System. These projects, when coupled with the Marine Highway Systems access to remote areas will mean cost savings for remote residents as well as increased passenger and freight volume for the Marine Highway in the foreseeable future.

The City of Seward and the Eastern Kenai Peninsula have had a long and mutually beneficial relationship with the Alaska Marine Highway System and the M/V Tustemena. After the 1964 Earthquake, it was the Home Porting of the M/V Tustemena that helped to rejuvenate our community after it was nearly swept away in a tidal wave. In the years since, there have been numerous attempts to remove service to Seward and to Home Port the vessel in another community. Each time these attempts have failed because Seward is the most cost effective location for Home Porting and because Marine Highway System customers in Seward and elsewhere are dedicated to its Seward stop. We strongly encourage the State of Alaska Department of Transportation – Public Facilities to re-evaluate and re-create new Prince William Sound and Western Alaska Regional Transportation Plans so that the M/V Tustemena continues to make stops in Seward and call our community its Home Port.

I am looking forward to seeing future versions of this plan and speaking with you about this issue further.

Sincerely,



David Paperman
Executive Director, Seward Chamber of Commerce

Cc: Tom Brigham, Commissioner - Juneau
Jeff Ottesen, Chief of Statewide Planning – Juneau
Marti Dilley, Statewide Plan Manager - Juneau
Rex Young, Kenai Area Planner – Anchorage
Gregory Patz – Marine Highway Planner - Juneau